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# One Trail, Many Meanings
## The Lolo Trail

*I have spread my dreams under your feet; tread softly, because you tread on my dreams.*

*View of sheep driveway along the Lolo Trail in the Clearwater National Forest,1933.*

In order to plan and manage a trail corridor well, information is needed to identify exactly what is being managed. What is the Lolo Trail System? It has been defined as (1) the Lolo Trail of prehistoric times, (2) the Lewis and Clark Trail of 1805-06, (3) the Bird-Truax Trail, built in the 1850s, (4) the Nee-Me-Poo Trail of 1877, and (5) the Lolo Motorway built in the 1930s. This trail system was probably never one single trail, but constituted a braided trail system evident today along a 100 mile-long mountain ridge through the heart of the Bitterroot Mountains, traversing the Clearwater National Forest in Idaho. Today, both the Lewis and Clark and Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trails also pass over it, although both of these National Historic Trails begin and end far to the east and west.

### *The Importance of Full Understanding*

Because of the diversity of use over time, confusion has developed about the Lolo Trail System. The term "Lolo" is, in fact, overused, for it might apply to any one of these routes. Knowledge of the prehistory of the Lolo Trail System is not only lacking, but has often been inaccurately presented in interpretation to the public. Furthermore, the "Nee-Me-Poo Trail," as used in government documents, is inconsistently applied to both the pre-historic Buffalo Trail and the 1877 route across which the non-Treaty Nez Perce fled the U.S. Army—yet they are not the same in several places.

The designation of the Nee-Me-Poo Trail as a National Historic Trail further adds to the confusion of the history of this trail and its significance. This should be of concern to the Nez Perce people in portraying their heritage to the public. Their conception of Nez Perce history is certainly much richer than showcasing one tragic event in the lifetime of the people.

The full history of this trail is much different from what is being proposed by the designation of the Nee-Me-Poo as a flight trail. The limitations that are implied by this interpretation are indeed troublesome, for interpretation is being conducted in a manner in which the non-Indian chooses, with little regard to what really happened on the trail over thousands of years.

Why should interpretation efforts and environmental education be an integral part of the Nee-Me-Poo Trail? Perhaps a quote from the German poet Goethe will best capture this thought: *was mann ways, sient mann*, or "one sees what one knows." The Association of Interpretive Naturalists has broadened this out to: "What we understand, we value, we protect, and cultivate; and what we do not understand we neglect, waste, and fear."

The Lolo Trail was viewed as having national significance in 1962 when it was designated a National Historic Landmark, and subsequently listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1966. In 1965, the Lolo Trail was designated a part of the Nez Perce National Historical Park by the passage of Public Law 89-19. The definition given the Lolo Trail by the NRHP is a trail running about 140–150 miles southwesterly from the vicinity of Lolo, Montana to the Weippe Prairie in Idaho.

Later national designations also overlie this route. The Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail was established in 1978, running from Wood River, Illinois, to the mouth of the Columbia River in Oregon. The Nez Perce (Nee-Me-Poo) National Historic Trail was established in 1986 and extends from the vicinity of Wallowa Lake, Oregon to the Bear's Paw Mountains Battlefield near Chinook, Montana. Across the Bitterroots, the 1877 Flight of the Nez Perce followed an 1850s Army-built track—the Bird-Truax Road—much of the way.

For the national historic trail, the official trail marker conforms to the shape established for trails within the National Trails System. The symbol is representative of the use of the trail as a travel route for Nez Perce families crossing the mountains to the Great Plains. The Nee-Me-Poo Trail is worn in places two to three feet deep and is one to two feet wide from long use and erosion.

*Weitas Meadow along the Lolo Trail. These meadows provided game, water, forage for stock,and protection from mountain winds. They were favored camp sites.*

### How the Trail Evolved

Along this network of trails, what are we managing? We need to consider the human use of this trail from the beginning of time. If we concentrate on the Nee-Me-Poo Trail as the route used only during 1877, we are missing other major uses of this trail system. If we only look at a corridor so wide along this trail we will miss the feeder trails that lead to these ridges that were used for hunting and spiritual use. We can not manage the trail with blinders on.

The environment along the course of the Nee-Me-Poo Trail has been modified by a number of large and small scale natural and man-related phenomena over the last 12,000 years. Several phases of human occupation can be seen in the landscape into the present. Perhaps the most obvious changes that have occurred have taken place in the last 100 years in conjunction with grazing, logging, fire suppression, and forest recreation. The land has changed to reveal different meanings. Through the drama of its changing forms explorers have been mystified, settlers have tamed the land and cultivated it, and today's generation has conquered it with motorized vehicles.

Before white men came, before the 1877 Flight, the Trail was used by the Nee-Me-Poo in a variety of ways over thousands of years. Sections were used to access areas where task groups were sent out in their seasonal rounds to collect berries, medicines, food supplements, roots in the meadows, fish, and game. A number of feeder trails diverge from the Nee-Me-Poo Trail and go off to different drainages, lakes, areas that the Nee-Me-Poo used—they even dropped off down to the Lochsa River thousands of feet below.

The trail was an Indian highway that connected the Columbia Plateau with the Great Plains in an amazing trade network and commerce route. The Nez Perce people were the major tradesmen of the Columbia Plateau. They moved a number of trade items from the Pacific coast across this trail (from such trade centers such as the Dalles, Oregon) to the Great Plains, and other items from east to west. The trail was used to reach buffalo hunting grounds where people stayed three years or more before coming home. Some went to visit friends and relatives in the Plains, since intermarriages had been taking place over centuries. Others traveled across for cultural sharing or religious events.

The Nee-Me-Poo Trail is characterized by a number of rock cairns which occur along the trail and are not known to exhibit any particular service. *Tum loyeets muh* is the Nez Perce term used in reference to these rock piles. It translates as "rocks stacked up." Some have said they serve as a place for messages, others say they are areas where young people have gone on vision quests and piled stones to keep them awake through the night vigil. Reverend David Miles, Sr. (personal communication, 1991) states that the rock piles signify an accompanying prayer. Sometimes, at a later date in their life, the men and women could return to this special place and put in a new stone as they sing a sacred song or songs and offer new prayers. This practice is called *tam-loy* or *Tam-loy yiic max*, which means, "wherein one left a memorial to oneself and found one's old self," or *Im matqu ya ko*.

Another view is where each stone held a significance to the individual. Some have recognized the stone piles to be trail markers, but perhaps they were left by herdsman or miners. Ralph Space notes the purpose of the Indian Post Office cairns is to mark the old trail which left the main divide and switchbacked down the mountains to the north. He describes the earliest historical reference to the cairns as found on a 1898 map which denotes the name Indian Post Office Mountain. Grant contends that the earliest recorded written record for the Indian Post Office is on O.D. Wheeler's "Trail of Lewis and Clark." It is noted that Wheeler traveled the trail in 1900 and reports two rock monuments. The Forest Service started piling rocks as trail markers as early as 1922 and continued to use them as trail markers and stands for heliographs through the years.

The first documented white men to cross the Trail were Lewis and Clark on their Voyage of Discovery, going west in 1805 and returning east in the spring of 1806. The Lolo Trail then became the main route to the Lower Snake River and the Columbia Plains for trappers and sealers. In 1831, a hardy trapper named John Work of the Hudson's Bay Company led his Snake River brigade of 30 to 40 people over the Trail.

The journals of Major John Owen provide further insight into the use of the trail as a fur trade route. He recognized the Lolo Trail as the most direct route to the Columbia River settlements and is said to have used it extensively. (Evidence of fur trapping can be found even today along the Trail with numerous trap lines of marten sets—some with the old wooden peg type. Trees can be seen with trapline blazes.) During the 1840s the fur trade dwindled and trapping ceased as a major activity. Without a demand for the product, and the mountain men and the fur trade now giving way to the increasing pressures of the white settlers, the fur trade became obsolete.

In the early 1850s, the 32nd Congress of the United States passed a law giving the Secretary of War authority to explore the western mountains for a possible railroad route extending from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. In 1853, the Steven's Railroad Survey explored the Trail.

Then the discovery of gold in the Clearwater River drainage of ldaho in 1860 brought an influx of miners across the Lolo Trail. A second rush occurred in the late 1860s with as many as 200 people filing into Moose and Independence Creeks with the rise of the new mining town of Moose City. This new town was accessible from the Lolo Trail where the terminus began near Cayuse Junction.

Further information is provided in John Owen's journals concerning the use of the Lolo Trail during the early settlement period. He describes meeting a number of small parties of miners and prospectors on the trail during his crossings. In addition, he provides information regarding the comments from parties in the Bitterroot Valley who were using or planning to use the Lolo Trail as a route in their travels. Apparently these early gold miners and explorers called the trail the "Northern Nez Perce Trail." In addition, some evidence of prospecting exists among the Nez Perce themselves, as found in a letter to L V. McWhorter dated 29, August 1926.

> I will be very glad to aid you or assist you, with all my ability, at any time... but I am feel sorry about you may not fine me at home. At certain occasion I may take trip up to mountains soon. Come back and go back again. Prospecting or fishing if nothing else.... Yours respectfully, S. Lott or Many Wounds.

With the coming of gold strikes came an era of criminals, opening another chapter in the history for the Lolo Trail. Highwaymen and thieves used the Lolo Trail to escape justice and rob travelers as late as 1904.

In his journals, Granville Stuart also refers to the use of the Trail to get from the Bitterroot Valley to the gold fields situated around Pierce City. After the Nez Perce Flight of 1877, the Army now felt the area was safe for homesteading.

The trail landscape was further affected in the 1920s by sheep and cattle grazing. The Nee-Me-Poo Trail from 1922 to 1945 was used extensively as a sheep driveway. As many as 35,000 sheep were grazed on the Clearwater National Forest. The first sheep to enter the upper Weitas and Cook Mountain country occurred in 1922 with a sheep driveway completed to Montana in 1924. Remnants of this sheep driveway are still visible along the Foot Rot Trail, where its junctions with the Nee-Me-Poo Trail are within a mile of Camp Martin, and was used as a stock driveway to Montana. Other visible evidence can be found along Lean-To-Ridge. Ralph Space reported two bands of sheep branched off the driveway that led to Rocky Ridge. Bald Mountain and Indian Grave were other grazing areas. About 26,000 sheep were grazed on the Clearwater National Forest in 1928 and about 35,000 by 1933.

The year 1925 heralded the introduction of cattle grazing on the Clearwater at Packer Meadows. Increased road construction enabled cattle to mainstream in the Forest in 1937 with permits being issued to graze cattle on Bimerick Meadows and at Boundary Peak. The Nee-Me-Poo Trail west of Bever Dam Saddle onto Weitas Meadows was used to drive cattle to their summer pasture at the Meadows.

The impact of grazing went unchecked for many years. By 1945, all sheep grazing had ended from pressure of the cattle livestock owners. Grazing by sheep and cattle had detrimental effects on the environment as was evidenced in many places along the trail.

### *Management Recommendations*

The following management recommendations are offered as measures to conserve the many lay-

*Typical ridgetop view from the Lolo Trail as it crosses the Bitterroot Mountains. Lewis and Clark called it a 'Sea of Mountains.' Note Bear Grass in foreground.*

ers of scientific, historic, and public values recognized along this Trail. In light of the establishment and proposed development of the route as a national historic trail, the potential for adverse impacts to the cultural resources is dramatically increased. Almost by definition, this designation and the uses it may attract will encourage visitation to the Trail. Assuming that this encouragement is effective, traffic over the Trail will increase, resulting in an acceleration of specific adverse effects already taking place. For example, people hunting and collecting relics are literally "loving the resource to death."

Currently, undesirable conditions include a steady stream of traffic by hikers and horseback riders; mortality to trees when horses are tethered for extended periods; conveniences and services necessary to trail development (such as campground improvements); off-road vehicles (ORVs) damaging fragile mountain meadows, lake shores, and stream banks; mountain bikes accelerating erosion along trails; mud and horse manure on trails; and fire suppression on trails. Excessive use can lead to resource damage and a degraded recreational experience.

Excessive use can also stem from many different people seeking many different—often conflicting—experiences. Horseback rider vs. mountain biker vs. hiker vs. sightseer vs. traditionalist. The intent of the limits of acceptable change (LAC) process is to establish a clear measure of what constitutes acceptable cultural conditions in the form of measurable standards. This process would appear to be most appropriate in accomplishing management objectives and goals.

Thus, despite the positive virtues of developing the historic trail in the interests of public values, that action may also introduce and accelerate adverse impacts. Recreation offers the opportunity to experience unique features of scientific and educational value. Therefore, the establishment of the route as part of a national historic trail constitutes a direct impact, and the management recommendations discussed below should be recognized as measures to mitigate that impact.

Executive Order 11593 directs that federal bureaus "conduct agency operations to maintain, restore, and preserve cultural resources on federal lands ...." This suggests that measures be taken immediately to curtail ongoing adverse impacts to cultural resources. Every effort should be taken to conserve the environmental setting and to preserve the Nee-Me-Poo Trail.

Certainly the most important elements of good management plans involve clearly stated objectives. Objectives relate to specific conditions to be achieved. A good plan must address the need for coordination to address resource management activities and non-conformist uses. For example, balancing the values of a national historical trail with the goals of supplying timber in a national forest must be made carefully.

In order to confirm the identification of specific cultural resource features and further clarify issues relating to the Trail, an accurate database must be formulated, providing a basis for meaningful interpretation and management. Monitoring and restricting the location and subsequent development of camps is essential. Proper signing and interpretation are necessary if this is to be accomplished.

Another management consideration should include the prohibition of construction and development within the trail corridor. Consideration of impacts on the Trail as a repository of scientific data and as symbolically evocative of past human use simultaneously needs to be addressed. Specifically, the effects of ORVs on the cultural and natural landscape, the introduction of conveniences necessary to trail development, relic collectors who consider what they do as recreation in itself, and the protection and interpretation of cultural resources are all to be considered.

Managers should be challenged to guide, modify, and, if necessary, directly control trail uses to minimize adverse impacts. Vulnerability of the resource is greater at certain times. For example, early July, when vegetation is easily damaged, is often when weekend visitation is the heaviest. In order to minimize excessive negative impacts, restrictions should be selective as to times, places, and users having the greatest potential for damage. Another step would involve determining the limits of acceptable change and identifying the carrying capacity of the different segments of the Trail for different types of human uses. Carrying capacity has been identified by Hendee as the magnitude of use that an area can withstand without unacceptable change. Following this, a monitoring system should be devised to assure long-term management success.

Identification of significant events and places on the Nee-Me-Poo Trail will assist the Forest Service in an on-going program of cultural history investigation, with the ultimate goal of appropriate public use and full, accurate information.

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All photos courtesy of the author.